



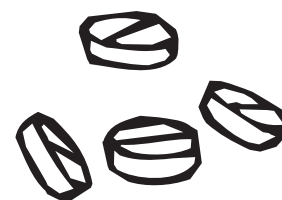
# Medicare Beneficiaries and Internet Pharmacies



**M**edicare beneficiaries are advised to use caution when ordering drugs through the Internet. Although there may be benefits gained from shopping with legitimate Internet pharmacies, a number of consumer warnings have been issued regarding Internet shopping, and these warnings should not be ignored. Simply put, “Medicare beneficiary, be alert!”

To Internet businesses, Medicare beneficiaries are a large, untapped market since the use of prescriptions is the most frequent health activity for beneficiaries. A recent survey by the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA), the Federal Medicare agency, showed that 83 percent of beneficiaries take medications each day. These prescriptions are often taken with over-the-counter medications and, increasingly, with herbal products. When taken together, some of these combinations may be harmful if not used with the guidance of a health care professional and pharmacist who know your medical history.

Being on the Internet does not guarantee that an Internet pharmacy is properly licensed to conduct business in your State. If a pharmacy is not licensed, then the medications you receive may not be “safe and effective” as required by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). HCFA and pharmacy investigators have identified a number of Internet pharmacy sites that provide no proof that the business is properly licensed. Kevin Kinkade, R.Ph., representing the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy (NABP), states that, “As more consumers turn to the Internet marketplace as a convenient shopping alternative, the risk for exposure to deception and dangerous scams increases. *There is a particular concern among the elderly population, which is often the target of unscrupulous marketing ploys.*”



# So how do 38 million elderly and disabled beneficiaries use an Internet pharmacy safely?

Before you turn on your computer, note the following tips offered by organizations like NABP, the American Medical Association (AMA), and other professional health organizations:

- Always have your physician or other personal health care provider prescribe your medications. The AMA is proposing rules that declare prescribing over the Internet unethical unless an established relationship between the patient and physician exists.
- Look for a seal of approval from a recognized agency. For example, NABP offers the Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Sites™ (VIPPS™) program. VIPPS certifies that the Internet pharmacy is fully licensed and complies with standards including protection of your medical information. Go to [www.nabp.net](http://www.nabp.net) for more details.
- Make sure the Internet pharmacy lists its address and toll-free phone number to contact the pharmacist—it's the law!
- Do not provide your Medicare number to an Internet site you cannot verify as being properly licensed and enrolled in Medicare. If you do, your number could be shared with many businesses that may bill Medicare, and you, for services you never received. Help protect the Medicare trust fund and check your Medicare statements. To report suspected fraudulent Medicare practices, call 1-800-HHS-TIPS.
- Make certain the site is secure, distinguished by a closed lock on the lower right corner of your screen, prior to sending your credit card and Medicare information.
- For additional information, you can access the FDA's website at [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov).

*The Internet presents opportunities and bargains for all consumers, but when it comes to your health care and prescribed medications, Medicare beneficiaries need to be alert.*

**For more information, call 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227).**

**For the hearing impaired (TTY/TDD: 1-877-486-2048).**

**You can also visit the website at [www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov).**

